

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 216 458

EA 014 642

AUTHOR Johnson, Carroll
TITLE Board Spats Getting You Down? Here's How to Resolve Them.
INSTITUTION National School Boards Association, Washington, DC. Educational Policies Service.
PUB DATE Apr 82
NOTE 6p.
JOURNAL CIT Updating School Board Policies; v13 n4 Apr 1982
EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Board Administrator Relationship; *Board of Education Policy; *Boards of Education; Elementary Secondary Education; Group Behavior; *Group Unity; Leadership Responsibility; *Organizational Effectiveness

ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of boards of education depends on many factors. Significant among these are maintenance of the board's group identity, proper conduct of meetings, development of community respect through dignified and courteous behavior, establishment of good listening habits by board members, united follow-through on majority decisions, and support for the superintendent. The institution and periodic review of written policies addressing board unity and suitable conduct can help assure the board's continued effectiveness. (Author/PGD)

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ED216458

UPDATING SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES

A Component of the EDUCATIONAL POLICIES SERVICE

Volume 13/Number 4/April 1982



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By Carroll Johnson

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...pacesetting policies from school boards nationwide...

A new Colorado law enables school boards to have four-day school weeks—reducing energy costs and absenteeism. When the Colorado legislature, in 1980, passed a law allowing school boards to define the school year in terms of a minimum number of classroom hours instead of days, 12 boards promptly changed their policies defining the school year as 1,080 classroom hours. They then reworked policies defining the school day, making each day longer so that schools would operate only four days per week. By the end of the 1980-81 school year, these districts reported such a savings in operating expenses and such a drop in both staff and student absences, that nine more Colorado boards followed suit with four-day school weeks in the current school year.

That number may rise, now that Colorado State University researchers have made public a mostly glowing evaluation report on the experiences of the original 12 districts. The report does record criticism from a few parents, and cautions that four-day weeks may not work so well in larger districts (the Colorado districts enroll from 30 to 330 students, and encompass from 130 to 1,997 square miles).

What the districts did. The policies set by most boards defined the school day as 7.5 hours, and the school year as 144 days, although one opted for a shorter day, and a year of 150 days.

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Board spats getting you down? Here's how to resolve them

By Carroll Johnson

Robert Frost once described reverse as similar to playing tennis without a net. Effective school boards meet a similar challenge.

Just as a tennis pro can pace the lines of the court blindfolded, board members observe "boundaries of play" that often seem invisible, and they do so without the aid of an umpire to remind them that those boundaries exist. The success of most boards is testimony to the fact that their members have internalized these boundaries of play. They almost always recognize whether behavior is within—or outside—the field of fair play. Let's see how they do it.

The first, and most important, boundary of play is defined by the individual board member's role in relation to the board's role as a whole. All powers of the board lie in its action as a group, and as a group only when in authorized session. The fact is, nearly all problems in intra-board relations are caused by the failure of individuals to observe their responsibilities to the board as a unit.

Identify with group

It is not difficult to understand: Americans are by and large individualistic. We do not instinctively strike a balance between the requirements of the group and the integrity of the individual. Instead, we tend to perceive it as an endemic conflict. A person of achievement, who has won election or appointment to the board as an individual, may fail to understand that he or she has no individ-

ual authority. Individual board members exercise their authority over district affairs only as they vote to take action at a legal meeting of the board. Once this is clearly understood, it becomes equally clear that success in ensuring quality education for the district's children will be won by the board collectively or not at all. An effective board member always works to strengthen the effectiveness of the group. Alone, an individual can sometimes cause a board to fail; success will always be the result of a team effort.

How can a board ensure that its members identify with the group? Two ways:

- **A policy on board member authority.** It's essential for all boards to have a written policy that delineates the boundaries of authority of individual members. The policy should simply remind board members that they have no legal authority to act on their own; that only at a legally convened meeting may board members, as a group, take action. (EPS file reference: BOARD MEMBER AUTHORITY, code BBAA)

- **Board member training.** Unless board members know about and observe board policies, the policies won't amount to much. The policy on board member authority should be reviewed at orientation sessions for new board members, and reviewed at other times as needed. Board members can know they're observing the policy when they can answer this question affirmatively: "Will my action strengthen the effectiveness of the board as a group?" (EPS file reference: BOARD MEMBER DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES, code BHB)

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Carroll Johnson, well-known education consultant, is a professor emeritus at Teachers College, Columbia University.

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School starting times varied, but elementary and high school students were placed on the same schedule so they could ride the same buses. Some districts took Monday off; they saved more energy costs since the buildings were already heated for classroom work on Fridays, the day most sports activities were also scheduled. Districts that shut classrooms Fridays found they had to keep buildings heated that day anyway since athletic events were scheduled then; they reported, however, that the Fridays-off schedule prevented sports events from interrupting the academic program.

Other results. The four-day week cut school bus fuel and maintenance costs by 20 percent or more in most districts. Another savings: Since teachers had an extra day for personal errands, their attendance improved, cutting the number of substitutes needed. For the same reason, student absenteeism dropped. Indeed parents, staff, and students all reported liking the new arrangement, but researchers caution that another study should be done when the novelty wears off. Already some parents have voiced complaints. Their kids don't know what to do with their day off, and the days in school are so long that kids arrive home physically exhausted. (EPS file references: SCHOOL YEAR, code IC; SCHOOL DAY, code ID)

Drug problems? A new policy from the East Baton Rouge, La., school board approves the use of dogs to sniff out hidden contraband. According to the policy, administrators may call in law enforcement officials, along with their specially trained dogs, when administrators suspect the existence of drugs in schools. If drugs are found, parents will be informed, but no arrests will be made. (EPS file reference: INTERROGATIONS AND SEARCHES, code JFG)

Board spats

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Follow board rules

The second most important boundary on board member behavior is prescribed by the board's own rules on the conduct of its meetings. As the regular board meeting is the only time the board can conduct its official business, it is critical that these meetings be conducted properly. Board members are elected to represent the best interests of the community, not react to the popular opinions or passions of the moment. To maintain that poise of objective leadership, the board should always maintain a certain dignity in its proceedings—and individual board members must observe the group's meeting procedures. Again, there are two ways to ensure that this happens:

• **Policy on meeting procedures.** A clearly defined meeting structure enhances the prestige and credibility of the board to the community as being open to public views, but not to public pressure. It is best to set out this structure as written policy. Effective boards often structure their meetings as follows: Public hearings and board discussion are kept separate. After citizens have had an opportunity to address an issue on the agenda, the board conducts its own discussion. No public interjections are permitted during the board's discussion. When that discussion has proceeded to a consensus in the view of the president, a formal vote is taken. A roll-call vote is desirable, but a recorded vote is absolutely necessary.

A perceived consensus is not enough. After all items on the agenda have been disposed of in this fashion, the meeting is opened to all public comments, suggestions, or new business. There are some exceptions to this pattern. As a courtesy, some boards place public participation as the first item on the agenda. Also, boards can discuss matters relating to personnel in private and, in most cases, should do so. Certain questions of law should be discussed in private session, too. (EPS file reference: BOARD MEETING PROCEDURES, code BDD)

• **More board member training.** Again, board members, both novice and veteran, must be trained to observe meeting procedures.

Earn respect and authority

Of course, a rational structure alone is not enough to ensure effective group action. That point brings us to a third boundary of play: A board's authority is not simply granted by legal statute. It must be earned by behavior worthy of it; authority cannot exist without respect. One seldom finds good schools in a community where the board of education is not respected.

An interesting aspect of human nature is that most people will take an individual at his or her own self-evaluation. The same holds true for school boards. If the board treats itself with respect, it will probably be treated with the same respect by the community. On the other hand, a board that bickers, that has members treating each other with contempt, will in all likelihood receive the same from the community, and deserve it.

UPDATING SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES is provided automatically each month to every board member and to the central offices of school districts subscribing to the Educational Policies Service of the National School Boards Association's School District Management Services Department. Subscribers may request sample policies referred to in articles from the EPS Policy Information Clearinghouse at NSBA offices, 1055 Thomas Jefferson Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007.

EPS STAFF: Lu Van Loozen, management services director; T. Susan Hill, contributing editor; Nancy Dickinson, production manager.

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NSBA President
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NSBA Executive Director
Thomas A. Shannon



Associate Executive Director
James Betchkal
Assistant Executive Director
Lee VanBremen

Different viewpoints need not preclude mutual respect. To put it personally, if a fellow board member has lost your respect, and even if that board member treats you with disrespect, you will be undermining the effectiveness of the board as a whole if you compound the problem. If instead you treat that member in public and private with respect, he may mend his ways. At worse, the problem will have been contained, and the destructive influence of that board member may be limited.

Winning respect and authority is also a matter of policy:

• **The ethics of boardmanship.**

What kind of behavior is productive to the group? Boards that have not thought out an answer to this question should take time to do so, and reduce their discussion to a statement on board member ethics. The statement might include comments on the importance of following board meeting procedures, being prepared for every meeting, listening courteously to opposing viewpoints, and so on. The National School Boards Association and, very likely, your state school boards association have published codes of ethics for board members that will be a helpful resource in this effort.

• **Policy review sessions.** The board that recently works out a policy on ethics will have reached a consensus as to what constitutes effective behavior. But what about new members? Again, a review of policy is an excellent vehicle for orienting new board members—and for reminding veteran board members of productive behavior.

Listen, listen

Before leaving the subject of ethical behavior, there is one kind of behavior to be considered most important: listening.

In meetings, you can show respect not only through courteous expression, but also through both the appearance and fact of attentive listening to your fellow board members and to the public. This is one talent many public bodies lack. How often have you attended meetings in which board members whisper to each

other during public hearings, and even during the comments of a colleague? For a board member, no skill is more important than listening, if that board member is to fulfill the public trust. A board member should never attend a meeting with a closed mind about any item on the agenda. The success of the meetings, and therefore of the board's entire function, rests upon the reasoned exchange of information and views with colleagues and the public before the resolution of a vote. A board

member who does not listen is simply not doing his job.

Uphold group discussions

Listening does not mean the listener agrees with the speaker; but it does lead us to the fourth boundary on an individual board member's actions: When all discussion is over and the vote has been taken, the successful board member recognizes that the board as a whole has taken a stand that he or she must uphold.

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SHORTS FROM THE COURTS

Sample policies that reflect decisions reviewed are available from the EPS Policy Information Clearinghouse. Use SEARCH certificates to make requests, and reference each request to the case name and to the policy code cited at the conclusion of each item.

'APPROPRIATE EDUCATION' DEFINED. Federal legislation may require school boards to provide an "appropriate education" for handicapped students, but "appropriate" is not synonymous with "best possible" education, a Virginia district judge ruled late last year. The case, *Bales v. Clerk*, arose when the parents of Evelyn Ann Bales sued to have the public schools pay the cost of her tuition at a private institution. A public school facility was available for the daughter, who was severely crippled in a 1977 car crash, and the judge noted that the facility — though it might not be perfect — was not inappropriate in the services it offered. A school board must consider costs, the judge said. Although he commended the parents for their motives, he added, "Neither they nor any other parents have the right under the law to write a prescription for an ideal education for their child and have the prescription filled at public expense." The decision will not be appealed. (EPS file reference: PROGRAMS FOR HANDICAPPED STUDENTS, code IGBA)

SEPARATE EXPULSION POLICY FOR HANDICAPPED. By refusing to review a lower court decision in *Turlington v. S-1*, the U.S. Supreme Court early this winter locked in a ruling requiring the Hendry County, Fla., school board to maintain a separate disciplinary policy for handicapped students. The earlier ruling by the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said that, according to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, only "specialized and knowledgeable" people can decide whether the misbehavior of a handicapped student is a result of the handicap. If it is, the student may not be excluded from federally funded programs.

Hendry County school board attorney John Bowen says the Supreme Court's action will create two disciplinary procedures in public schools, one for handicapped and another for nonhandicapped students. He believes one procedure would do — the one spelled out by the high court in its 1975 *Goss v. Lopez* decision, which outlined the rights of all students to a hearing before expulsion could be ordered. Bowen and other observers expect *Turlington* to be widely cited as a precedent in future court cases. (EPS file reference: STUDENT EXPULSION, code JGD)

Board spats

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More succinctly, it is the responsibility of each individual member to uphold the collective action. If, in an extreme case, your conscience requires continued opposition, it must be within the formal structure of the board's operation. If you wish to reintroduce a topic to the agenda for reconsideration or amendment, then do so. But conscience is not a license for behind-the-scenes politicking or sabotage. Undermining the effectiveness of the board on one issue will in the end undermine its effectiveness on all issues. A board that fails to pull together as a team will fail to accomplish anything of educational significance.

There are some decisions over which continued opposition after a vote is disastrous, and some where a unanimous vote is highly desirable. The annual budget, bond issues, the closing of schools due to declining enrollment: These are issues on which the board must stand or fall together. Decisions of such moment need the united leadership of the board to win community acceptance.

Support the superintendent

The relationship of the board to the superintendent is even more significant. The superintendent is not simply an employee under the board's authority; the superintendent is the administrative arm through which all the board's actions will take effect. The board-superintendent relationship is a symbiotic

one: Each depends on the other.

Without the constructive support of the board, a superintendent will be ineffective. By strengthening the superintendent's hand in the community, the board enhances its own effectiveness. Therefore, all votes relating to the superintendent should be unanimous: whether they be to employ, to extend a contract, or to grant a raise. If the board is unable to maintain a close, harmonious working relationship with its own spokesman, it will seldom have the respect of the community.

Active support by the individual of the group's actions, and of the chief administrator who must implement those actions, is also a legitimate subject for policy. While general support of group action might be included as an important behavior in the board's policy on the ethics of its members, a separate policy on board-superintendent relations is a sound idea. This policy should state explicitly that the board and superintendent can expect mutual support. (EPS file reference: BOARD-SUPERINTENDENT RELATIONSHIP, code BDC)

Having discussed the proper conduct of meetings, the importance of winning the community's respect through behavior both courteous and dignified, the significance of listening to colleagues and to the public, and the necessity of upholding the board's majority vote, as you know, making it all work can be even harder than it sounds. One thing is evident above all: The individual board members must come to iden-

tify themselves with the group effort. They must come to know each other well enough to understand the unique contributions their differing judgments, imaginations, and values can bring to the effectiveness of the board as a whole. And they must give their loyalty to the group by respecting confidences and privileged information, by each carrying his or her own load, and by remembering at all times that they have no individual authority.

The "boundaries of play" are not so invisible for the effective board member—or for the board with written policies that outline these boundaries. Unless policies are practiced and publicized, however, the boundaries may seem invisible at times to friends, constituents, and, occasionally, even school employees. Without a publicized statement, a board member might be asked to make a statement on behalf of the board, and be misunderstood when he explains that only the board president and superintendent are spokesmen. He might be asked to make commitments prior to votes, and be the target of criticism and the recipient of gossip. In sum, he might be assumed to have an authority he knows he lacks. Though his behavior in and out of the board meetings may seem circumscribed, the results will not be. Respect, dignity, and integrity will always be understood in the end and, with the collective authority thus earned, the effectiveness of the school board in achieving quality education for the children of the district will be greatly enhanced. ■

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1055 Thomas Jefferson St., N.W., 6th Floor
Washington, D.C. 20007